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Leave *Left Behind* Behind

Luke 12:15-23

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BACK TO MAIN SERMON PAGE

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With all due respect to those of you who have been enjoying the *Left Behind* series of books, I would like to say I think they are silly. In truth, *Harry Potter* makes more sense that *Left Behind.* The *Left Behind* series is predicated upon a flawed theory of the end of time. Now, there are several approaches to the last days that Christians of good character hold, but the truth of it is that all of these theories (including the one to which I hold) have one or more major puzzles which cannot be adequately resolved. Biblical Christians simply disagree in this area, so it is probably unkind of me to categorize one view as silly. Yet, in my in this area not so humble opinion, the variant of pre-millennialism on display in *Left Behind*, known as 'pre-trib', is an especially egregious example of *eisegesis*, that is, reading something *into* the biblical text.

Pre-millennialists believe that Christ will come a second time publicly and begin a public, thousand year personal reign on earth. They believe that there is a seven year period that will come *just before* Christ's public second coming, and that at the *beginning* of this seven year period, Christ will secretly come and take away, or rapture out, all who are Christians. Thus, in the first book of the series, entitled *Left Behind*, we have some people on an airplane who just disappear, leaving those who are not Christians 'left behind.'

I appreciate that many Christians have a keen interest in the future, but you know, this is nothing new. In the year 1000, people watched the skies for signs of the apocalypse. Most of the Middle Ages saw intense millenarian movements. Followers of Joachim of Fiore even resorted to self-flagellation, blaming themselves for Christ's failure to return on schedule. In the 1500's, Martin Luther thought the world was in its final days. William Miller, a Vermont pastor, calculated that the world would end in 1843. In the early 1970's, Hal Lindsay made a huge splash with his book *Late, Great Planet Earth*, in which he pretty much predicted the end by the end of that decade, and while I was working at Hughes Aircraft Company in southern California in 1975, a pastor in Redondo Beach predicted a specific date for the end in October of that year, according to a co-worker, who was still there at work the next day.

There is a kind of Gnosticism is this desire to know the timing of the cosmos - the sheer headiness of being in the know, privy to God's calendar. It's all very appealing, especially to those who feel disenfranchised by this world's status quo, or even among those who are in power. For me, it seems more to be about being on the winning side, than following Jesus to the cross. And beside that, I believe it's bad biblical scholarship.

Pastor Michael Lindvall tells a great story about a year in the life of a small town called North Haven, Minnesota, where he was the pastor some years ago. He begins by talking about Hazel Hofer, who was widowed the day of September when snow hit North Haven, and her husband went out to shovel and had a heart attack. Anton had been a farmer and had been doing well. In fact, he had just the summer before purchased three new Butler storage units for all the field corn he expected to harvest the next season. He had bought out two flat-broke

neighboring farmers and so had more land to cultivate. Or so he thought. After visiting Anton's wife Hazel, after comforting her as best he could, Pastor Lindvall climbed into his car and looked through his salt-smeared windshields at Anton's three new Butler storage units, and thought of today's passage from the Gospel of Luke.

A few months later, it was the week before Thanksgiving for Pastor Lindvall, as it is for us here at CPC. But it had been a lean year in southwestern Minnesota, and his congregation were mostly all farmers, and so he was trying to figure out what he should say to his congregation, let alone to Hazel Hofer. But he never got the chance because on Thursday night Pastor Lindvall was struck down with the flu - the shakes, headache, sore throat, and every preacher's dread plague, laryngitis. By Friday noon he could only croak one word, and that was 'Vicks.'

And there was only one other minister in the region who was free for the following Sunday, and that was the Reverend Lex Ardent. Lex was a retired clergyman who had spent his working days as an evangelist, on a tent meeting preaching circuit that was the ancestor of television ministry. He had called his church the Apostolic Church of the Divine Christ in God, which broke off from a splinter group of a sect whose name includes all the same words arranged in a different sequence.

Unfortunately, it was well known that Lex only preached one sermon. He had got away with that over his forth-year career in itinerant evangelism because he had been forever moving from one tent meeting to the next. If his schedule brought him back to the same town again, Lex believed that a person who had been saved by his sermon the first time through would not need to be present the second time around. If someone did return, the sermon must not have worked the first time and he could well stand to hear it again.

Lex's lone sermon was about the 'rapture,' popularized now in *Left Behind* and the other books in the series. On the rear of his rusty Buick LeSabre Lex had a bumper sticker that said: IN CASE OF RAPTURE, DRIVER WILL DISAPPEAR. The bumper sticker was the core of Lex's theology and pretty much the point of his whole sermon.

Mostly, Lex would paint a series of graphic pictures - people in a supermarket line, kids in a school classroom, guy standing in an auto parts store, and one of them would disappear without warning. He'd launch the sermon quietly and slowly climb into a sermonic frenzy, with the goal, of course, to scare the bejabbers out of his listeners, and telling them that if they didn't come to Jesus quick, they too would be 'left behind.'

When Lex preached his sermon to Second Presbyterian Church on Thanksgiving Sunday, Pastor Lindvall was too ill and mute to help with the liturgy, but he was not sick enough to stay home in bed. He writes that, frankly, he was a bit curious as to how Lex would work his sermon around Thanksgiving. So Lex did his usual thing, painting pictures of lukewarm Sunday-only Christians with disappointed looks on their faces as they watched the few and the true swept up in the 'rapture.' And all of this was a great novelty to the politely attentive congregation of Presbyterians, who rarely let themselves get swept up in anything, much less such rhetoric. After twenty-five minutes of this, Lex ended his sermon by slicing the air with his fingers, closing his eyes, and fairly shouting, "Thank God, thank God, in this season of Thanksgiving, thank God that it is not too late for anyone in this room!"

Lex sat down and look exhausted. He had chosen a hymn that worked well with his text, but one that the congregation hadn't ever sung before, so most of the sound was coming from the choir. Now, the choir, eight ladies and one gentleman, receded out of the church on the last hymn, as was their custom. Since Pastor Lindvall's church had no center aisle, and since if the choir were to go out by way of one of the two side aisles they'd find themselves going out the

front doors and into twenty-degree weather, they instead left by the choir loft, which was up front on the left, and would march across the chancel and behind the communion table and out the rear right door, which would put them into the social hall, and they would then head straight for the coffeepot.

This route was a direct but narrow one with one hazard - a wooden heating grate in the floor directly behind the big oak communion table. The grate measured two and a half feet square. It was made of pine and was just set in the hole in the floor that opened to the heating duct below. The duct bent at a right angle about three feet down before continuing on to the old hot-air furnace.

Emma Bowers, a soprano, was new to the choir. She's a small woman who gave herself another three inches by wearing those spiked high-heeled shoes that faded from fashion in the early 70's. Well, as Emma passed over the heating grate that Sunday morning, her right heel went into one of the little square holes and lodged there tight. The processing choir, hymnbooks in front of their faces and opened to page 233, slowed as Emma tugged to free her foot. It would seem her shoes were old and tight because her shoe stayed on and the heel didn't break off. On her third and mighty pull, Emma lifted the whole grate (which wasn't so heavy) right out of the duct and moved on, trooper that she was, walking as if she'd been shot in the leg but was trying not to notice.

Right behind her was Elsie Johnson, Alvina's younger sister by ten years who, to put it kindly, did not ever have a keen awareness of her immediate environment. Elsie could see all right, she just never seemed *to notice* things. Pastor Lindvall writes that he turned to see if Lex had noticed Emma plowing along with the grate on her foot, determined to make it to the rear door as if nothing had happened. Lex had just looked over to see what the extra noise was all about just as Elsie stepped to where the grate wasn't. Elsie gave a little squealing 'Whoop!' and just disappeared from sight behind the communion table.

Lex dropped his jaw in a flabbergasted gape. His eyes went wide, his hymnbook slipped from his hand, and then he shut his eyes tight: THE RAPTURE! Still in the grip of his sermonic euphoria, he saw before his very eyes the scene he had been putting into words for forty-five years. Elsie had been taken and he was left behind! This state of flabbergasted misapprehension lasted for perhaps four seconds, and they were probably the longest four seconds in Lex's life.

Elsie hadn't even fallen over but had just stepped square into the duct and went down the three feet. There wasn't a scratch on her and Pastor Lindvall writes that, to this day, she's not real clear as to what happened.

Lindvall went home after church that morning exhausted, at a whole bag of potato chips, and went to bed. About eight o'clock that evening he awoke feeling much better. The worst of the flu aches were passed and his mental picture of those four seconds in Lex's life were becoming a great joy to him. He remembered today's passage from Luke 12, and remembered Anton Hofer who had put up the three new Butler bins one day and was gone the next. And he thought of Elsie vanishing with a 'Whoop!' and thought of all the dear hearts who have vanished in the more normal way, who have gone to be with Jesus, as I stand here and think of Mary, of Eula and Jerry, of Ron, of Tim, of Dorothea, of Vint, of Warren, and all the others.

Lindvall took a shower that evening and put on his bathrobe and looked at himself in the mirror. He imagined himself vanishing into the floor with a 'Whoop!' and said to his soul: "Soul, you haven't got a thing in your storehouse, no bank account, you don't even own the house you live in. You have no silo to put silage in, but here you are, graying and getting lumpy. You might never have been. You have no right to be here, but here you are."

He then went into his son's bedroom to kiss him good night, much as I like to do with Ben, and did what I also like to do, which is to crawl up beside him and move off towards sleep together. In those moments, I hear Ben's breathing, feel his fidgety hands and legs move about, experience this chest pulled up against my side. Lying there with Ben it all falls into place - lost crops, flu, near disasters in church - all of this is as nothing when set next to the gratuitous gift of life here and now. This is indeed the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it.

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